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C O N F I D E N T I A L ATHENS 000788

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SUBJECT: BALKAN CHODS' MEETING OVERSHADOWED BY TURKISH REITERATION OF LONG-STANDING UNARMED-FIGHTERS PROPOSAL

Classified By: AMBASSADOR CHARLES RIES. REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: On April 18-19, Balkan region chiefs of defense (CHODs), as well as U.S. Naval Forces Europe Commander Admiral Ulrich, attended the first of what have now been agreed to be annual Balkan CHOD summits. Greek press attention thus far has been focused on Turkish CHOD General Buyukanit's reiteration of Turkey's long-standing call for unarmed Greek and Turkish flights over the Aegean. While such proposals have a long history, Greek officials have never been warm to the idea. They see it as a Turkish ruse to weaken Greek defenses in the region and an affront to Greek sovereignty over its Aegean territory. END SUMMARY.

BALKAN CHODs GATHER

¶12. (SBU) On April 18-19, CHODs from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Turkey, as well as U.S. Naval Forces Europe Commander Admiral Ulrich, attended a summit of Balkan CHODs arranged by Greek CHOD Admiral Chinofotis. Read-outs of the meeting so far have been sketchy (Embassy will report septel as more information becomes available). One result has already been publicly announced: the CHODs agreed to make the "Thessaloniki Initiative" an annual event held on a rotational basis in each participating country. Next year's meeting will be held in Andalya, Turkey.

TURKEY FRONT AND CENTER

¶13. (SBU) Predictably, attention in Greece has focused on statements by Turkish CHOD Buyukanit. Speaking to reporters, the Turkish general stated that Turkish warplanes "training" over the Aegean did not violate Greek air space and were not bound by civil aviation rules for filing advance flight plans with air traffic control Athens. Turkey, Buyukanit said, "cannot perceive (the boundaries) of Athens FIR (Flight Information Region) as Greek borders." Greek CHOD Admiral Chinofotis retorted that "there is (Turkish) air activity over the Aegean that does not conform to international air traffic rules."

UNARMED-FLIGHTS PROPOSAL

¶14. (SBU) Overshadowing all this, however, was Buyukanit's reiteration of long-standing Turkish proposals that Greek and Turkish fighters fly unarmed over the Aegean. Buyukanit told reporters on April 18: "We are ready to disarm our fighters. I do not understand why fighters should fly armed. You are not our enemies. We are ready to do this. You should do the

same." Buyukanit made a similar proposal during his November 2006 visit to Greece, but it lost traction in drawn-out and inconclusive "consultative" talks between Greek and Turkish diplomats.

¶5. (C) Greek contacts point out that the idea is not new. It was discussed by Secretary Christopher and then-Foreign Minister (now President) Papoulias during a December 1993 NATO ministerial in Turkey, during PM Andreas Papandreou's visit to Washington in April 1994 and in May 1997, when the U.S. DoD issued a proposal for confidence-building measures (CBMs) between Greece and Turkey following informal talks conducted at NATO under SYG Solana.

GREEKS HAVE ALWAYS REJECTED

¶6. (C) Greek officials, however, have never been warm to the unarmed-fighters formula, judging that any such step would lead to weakening of Greek sovereignty and defenses. This has not prevented Turkey from periodically offering the suggestion. The Greeks see Buyukanit's latest proposal in Thessaloniki as continuing this long tradition.

RIES